Sociological Analysis of Identity Concepts and Social Belonging in Contemporary Persian Novels

Mohammadreza Hesaraki[1]

Assistant Professor, Department of Persian Language and Literature, ShQ.C., Islamic Azad University, Tehran, Iran

Abstract: Sociology of literature, as one of the new and effective approaches in the criticism and analysis of literary texts, especially novels, plays a key role in explaining the representation and social structures of contemporary societies. The contemporary Persian novel, due to its extensive narrative space and ability to portray individual and collective experiences, has provided a rich platform for recognizing and analyzing fundamental concepts such as identity and social belonging. Using the theoretical framework of the sociology of literature, this article has attempted to examine the discourses of identity and sense of belonging in contemporary Persian novels in an analytical and systematic manner. The findings indicate that contemporary Persian novels not only reflect the complex social, cultural, and historical crises and contradictions of Iranians, but also reflect the processes of redefining and reconstructing individual and collective identity in the context of current political and social changes. Also, social belonging, as the psychological and structural connection of characters with family, ethnicity, gender, and society, has become one of the main axes of confronting critical ruptures and tensions in literary texts. This research shows that the sociological analysis of contemporary Persian novels has a prominent ability to represent the process of modernization, the tension between traditional and modern identity, and the processes of social belonging/alienation, and thus effectively contributes to a deeper understanding of the conditions and developments of contemporary Iranian society. Thus, this article emphasizes the constructive and analytical role of the novel in the study of Iranian society and shows that the contemporary Persian novel, as a product and social factor, can be a multifaceted and living mirror of the identity and belonging developments of society.

Keywords: Identity, social belonging, contemporary Persian novel, sociology of literature, identity crisis, collective belonging, modernity, social representation, social criticism, cultural changes.

Introduction

The sociology of literature emerged in the mid-nineteenth century as an interdisciplinary branch between sociology and literary studies, examining the influence of social, cultural, and economic structures on the production and representation of literary texts. This approach sees the study of literature not simply as an independent artistic product, but as a deeply embedded and inseparable product of social, historical, and cultural contexts. In this framework, literary texts are known as "social institutions" that, while reflecting the status quo, also provide the basis for criticism and even social transformations. In other words, novels and other literary genres present a living scene of the conflicts, contradictions, and dynamics of society, and by representing the life experiences of individuals, they provide the opportunity to study society through a narrative-oriented and humanistic lens.

In contemporary Iran, this close connection between literature and society is more evident than in any other period. Extensive political, economic, and cultural developments, generational tensions, changes in family structures, widespread immigration, and exposure to modernity and globalization have provided the conditions for the emergence of diverse and multi-voiced novels. These literary works provide objective and subjective documentation for analyzing concepts such as identity and social belonging, which are key axes of contemporary sociology for understanding the status of individuals and groups in today's complex world.

The concept of identity, which is considered in sociology as a dynamic and multidimensional process, reflects the search of individuals and societies for the definition of "self" and alignment or non-alignment

with others. In contemporary Persian novels, identity crises resulting from the pressure of the conflict between tradition and modernity, indigenous culture and globalization, or political mobilization are seen. On the other hand, social belonging, meaning a feeling of psychological and social dependence on various institutions and groups, is considered the foundation of an individual's stability in society, which is reflected in literary works in the form of characters' relationships with family, ethnicity, class, gender, and other social relationships.

This article seeks to systematically analyze the concepts of identity and social belonging in contemporary Persian novels using the theoretical framework of the sociology of literature. In addition to opening a window to understanding the complex social layers of Iranian society, such an analysis can show how literature as a social institution, by narrating and representing human experiences, provides the capacity for critique, transformation, and reconstruction of individual and collective identities. This interdisciplinary perspective recognizes literature not simply as a reflection of reality, but as an active agent in the construction of social realities that can, through narrative, help rethink and redefine fundamental concepts of identity and belonging in contemporary society.

Definitions and Concepts of Identity from a Sociological Perspective

Identity in sociology is a multidimensional and dynamic concept that is considered one of the most fundamental and complex issues in analyzing the status of the individual and society. Unlike psychological perspectives that focus mainly on identity as stable individual characteristics, sociology considers identity as a dialectical process that is formed in the individual's continuous interaction with social structures, groups, and institutions, and that constantly changes in the context of historical and cultural conditions.

Definition of identity

The most specific and comprehensive definition of sociology is that identity is the "balance between self and other"; that is, identity is the product of an individual's relationship and difference with others (Krajer, quoted by Yousefi, 2004); in simpler terms, identity is the distinctive aspect of "I" from "I am not." Castells (1380) defines identity as "the process of meaning-making based on cultural characteristics or a set of interconnected cultural characteristics," some of which take precedence over other sources of meaning in a society. This meaning, which is the result of the reconstruction of past experiences, collective memory, social institutions, and cultural customs, gives an individual or group the ability to distinguish and present themselves in the social world.

According to Blackwell (Johnson, 1997), identity is "a relatively stable conception of who and what one is in relation to others, which is formed in the process of social interaction and socialization." Therefore, identity is not simply an innate characteristic but rather the product of a process in which an individual internalizes the roles, values, and norms of the social environment.

Dimensions of identity

Identity is usually composed of several main dimensions that are interconnected and mutually influencing:

1. Personal identity: It is a set of physical, emotional, religious, moral, and intellectual characteristics of an individual that differentiates him/her from others.
2. Collective or social identity: It is based on the sense of belonging to groups, classes, minorities, ethnicities, or social institutions. Social identity is constructed by an individual's membership in these groups and acceptance or rejection of their values and norms. For example, national, religious, or gender identity are examples of collective identity (Tajfel, quoted by Waziri, 2013).
3. Cultural identity: Cultural identity, as a complex and multidimensional concept, refers to a set of cultural characteristics, values, beliefs, and symbols that connect an individual to a particular social or ethnic group. This identity reflects not only the culture in which the individual grew up and interacted, but also the interactions and experiences of the individual in the social and historical context in which he or she lives.

The process of identity formation

Identity construction and change is a complex and multifaceted process during which an individual:

- Learns to internalize social roles and values through primary and secondary socialization (interaction with family, school, peers, and social institutions).
- It is influenced by identification; that is, it defines itself by internalizing the characteristics, values, and behaviors of others and groups (Rozenhan and Seligman, 2006).
- Through individual and collective experience and cognition, new meanings of identity are achieved. This cognition includes the ability to differentiate oneself from others and to describe and explain one's situation (Brian Fay, 2005).
- Identity is multi-layered and multifaceted, and each individual may have different identities that are temporarily or permanently prominent in different situations and social relationships.
- Characteristics of Identity from a Sociological Perspective
- Relational: Identity is formed in the context of interaction with others and gains meaning in relation to "others." For this reason, identity represents the relationship between "I" and "non-I."
- Plurality: Individuals typically have multiple social identities that may coexist simultaneously (such as individual, ethnic, national, and gender identities).
- Relative stability and changeability: Although identity usually appears relatively stable, it can undergo change and redefinition within the context of social, historical, and cultural circumstances.
- Foundation on values and symbols: Identity is formed on the basis of a set of positive values, beliefs, and symbols that the individual and the group have accepted as sources of meaning.
- Source of social order: Identity, as the essence of social norms and roles, is effective in organizing society and maintaining normative coherence.

Identity crisis and conflicts

The term identity crisis was first coined by a German psychologist named Erik Erikson. When the values and norms of different groups to which an individual belongs are contradictory or conflicting, the individual experience identity conflict; a situation that leads to an identity crisis and can have unpleasant psychological and social consequences such as routine, restlessness, isolation, or multiple personalities (Moeedfar, 2006). In short, from a sociological perspective, identity is a dialectical process that is shaped by the interaction between the individual and society, the agreement and conflict of values, power relations, and cultural representation. This process both defines the individual and determines social boundaries, and therefore the focus of studies in the sociology of identity is on social and cultural structures and how they are reflected in individual and group identities.

This deep and multifaceted view of identity allows the psychological, social, and cultural dimensions of identity to be properly analyzed in the study of literary texts, and the dependence between the individual experience of characters and their broader social contexts to be clarified.

Sociological-base definitions and concepts of social belonging

Social belonging is one of the fundamental concepts in sociology, which refers to an individual's sense of dependence, attachment, and loyalty to society or social groups, and plays a vital role in maintaining social cohesion and stability. In sociological literature, social belonging can be understood as an emotional and cognitive sense that is created during the formation of individuals' personalities and socialization processes, and has a direct effect on the level of mental health, social connections, and civic participation. Alan Berow has distinguished between "participation" and "belonging" in two important aspects: participation means active action and commitment in collective life, and belonging is a state or psychological state of attachment to a group or society. In other words, social belonging expresses an individual's decision to internalize his or her feeling as part of the collective "we", while participation is considered its external and active aspect.

Markowsky-Valver considers emotional attachment and a sense of belonging to the community to be "an essential and constructive element" in establishing and strengthening group solidarity, which

ensures the bond between group members and guarantees group dynamics. According to Homans, this sense of group belonging directs social actions and ensures the survival and development of the social group, and its weakening directly endangers the social foundations.

Social belonging`s Characteristics and dimensions

- Sense of psychological attachment: Social belonging means a deep and enduring feeling of psychological dependence on society, in which an individual considers himself an inseparable part of the larger "we".
- Solidarity and social cohesion: Belonging creates solidarity between individuals and strengthens internal group communications, which are vital for maintaining social cohesion and stability.
- Collective identity: Social belonging helps to form and strengthen collective identity and creates a sense of "we" in individuals, which distinguishes one society from others. This aspect plays an important role in national identification.
- Psychosocial function: Belonging is a vital factor in mental health, facilitates civic participation, and motivates social activities.

The process and factors of social belonging formation

Social belonging is dynamically influenced by the structural and cultural factors of society. Socialization, norms, family relationships, reference groups, and social institutions are key factors in the formation of a sense of belonging. Also, instability or transformation of social structures, especially in transitional societies such as Iran, weakens social belonging and reduces individual and collective participation.

The importance of social belonging in social continuity

Social belonging has been interpreted as a connecting force between the individual and society, a "condition for survival and dynamism" of social life. The lack of a sense of belonging leads to individual isolation, reduced social trust, and increased alienation and psychological insecurity, which have negative consequences for the health of society.

Analysis

The contemporary Persian novel, as one of the most pristine arenas for representing and analyzing individual and collective experiences in Iranian society, has been able to highlight complex and multi-layered issues of identity and social belonging in the form of narratives. The space provided by fiction is a suitable context for reflecting on the developments and contradictions resulting from the processes of modernization, structural and cultural changes, and social crises at the individual and collective levels. A sociological analysis of these works provides the opportunity to discover the mechanisms of reproduction, critique, and redefinition of the concepts of identity and belonging within the framework of contemporary Iranian society.

1. Identity representation as a multilayered and interactive process

In contemporary Persian novels, identity is not a fixed and uniform entity but a dynamic and reflective process, one in which characters constantly struggle between traditional values and the pressures of modernity, nationality and globalization, and individuality and collective belonging. These struggles often manifest themselves in the form of identity crisis or identity plurality. For example, in the works of Abbas Marouf (Symphony of the Dead), we see characters caught in a conflict between traditional family values and their own individual needs and the modern world. These examples show that identity in the Persian novel is always shaped in the context of power and social relations, especially through historical and cultural crises.

2. Addressing social belonging; the link between the individual and society

Social belonging in contemporary Persian novels is based on the psychological, cultural, and structural bonds between characters and social institutions such as family, ethnicity, class, and society. Many novels focus on the interrelationships between the individual and the family, depicting crises such as generational divides, conflicts with traditional social norms and structures, and a lack of belonging. This belonging, whether in the form of strong loyalty to

collective relationships or in the form of feelings of alienation and rejection, plays a decisive role in the fate of the characters and reflects broader socio-cultural tensions.

3. The impact of historical and political developments on identity and belonging

Important social processes such as the Islamic Revolution, war, migration, and economic changes have caused definitions of identity and belonging to evolve in contemporary Persian novels. The novels well depict the historical and social situation of the characters in the form of individual stories. And in this process, they reinterpret the meanings of national, religious, ethnic, and gender identity. Political developments have led to the formation of new or reconstructed collective identities that have profoundly influenced the structures of fiction and the style of narration.

4. Gender dimension in the representation of identity and belonging

Contemporary Persian women's fiction literature pays special attention to the issue of gender identity and women's belonging to family and society. By criticizing traditional roles and gender relations, these works have explained the crises and conflicts of women in society and revealed new dimensions of identity. From this perspective, identity is presented as a realm of activism and resistance against unequal gender structures.

5. The confrontation between the individual and society and the issue of alienation

In many contemporary novels, loneliness, alienation, and the failure of the characters to find a stable belonging and identity are the focus of the story. As a social representation, the novel reflects the psychological, cultural, and structural dimensions of alienation and simultaneously proposes ways to re-emerge belonging and redefine identity. This shows that the contemporary Persian novel not only reflects problems, but also provides a space for searching for new ways of finding identity and belonging.

6. Transition from the general to the particular; attention to individualism and social differentiation

The contemporary Persian novel has moved from a stage that focused more on generalizations and simple historical-social structures to a stage that, while emphasizing the complexities and contradictions of society, has brought individual life to the stage with all its details and psychological and social angles. These developments reflect the cultural and social changes in Iranian society, which are reflected in the context of the novel.

Conclusion

A sociological analysis of the concepts of identity and social belonging in contemporary Persian novels shows that these literary works, beyond merely reflecting objective and social realities, act as a reflective and critical field in response to historical, cultural, and political changes in Iranian society. Contemporary Persian novels, which emerged in periods influenced by modernity, revolution, war, immigration, and dozens of other social transformations, have provided a context-like environment for representing the complex, multifaceted processes of forming and defining individual and collective identities. These novels show that identity is not a fixed and static phenomenon but a dialectical and multilayered product that is constantly redefined and reconstructed in the context of social relations, contradictions and suspensions of cultural life. The conflict between tradition and modernity, local and global, individual and collective, and rigid power structures against individual and social will are among the main elements of identity crises in these works. Contemporary novels also provide a unique window into understanding social belonging as a sense of psychosocial connection and solidarity with sociocultural structures that support social order and can at the same time be the subject of criticism and challenge.

On the other hand, social belonging in Persian novels, especially in the form of characters' relationships with family, ethnicity, gender, and community, in addition to its role as a facilitator of cohesion, is also introduced as a basis for confronting crises of alienation and isolation. As a result, the novels, while depicting the tense atmosphere between the individual and social institutions, also depict the processes of recovering belonging and rethinking identity concepts, which indicates the necessity and possibility of cultural and social transformation. In short, the contemporary Persian novel, as a cultural institution and social representation, can simultaneously act as a living mirror of the real state of society and an effective tool in shaping and reproducing new individual and collective identities. The specialized and

sociological analysis of these texts not only helps to more accurately understand the extensive social and cultural developments in Iran, but also provides a sensitive position for understanding the interaction between literary narrative and identity structures. In other words, this research emphasizes that the critical study of contemporary Persian novels, especially with interdisciplinary approaches of literary sociology, can establish a solid bridge between the understanding of literary texts and the socio-cultural analysis of contemporary Iran; a bridge that allows for the recognition of the roots of crises and ruptures in identity and social belonging, and offers theoretical and practical solutions for recognizing and resolving existing challenges. This confirms the importance of the novel as a cultural movement that plays a sensitive role in the dynamics of Iranian society and demonstrates the need to strengthen sociological and cultural studies in the field of contemporary literature.

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